

Rev David Graham Immortal Memory 1938

Graham began by saying that, in July, 1796, when Burns was lying on his deathbed in Dumfries, conscious that the tide of colossal popularity had ebbed, but believing that Prophetic conviction that it had ebbed only to return with richer and fuller flow, he uttered these prophetic and reassuring words, "Don't be afraid, I'll be more respected a hundred years after I am dead than I am at present." Never was a prophecy more amply fulfilled. So that today, the most assured fact in our experience was the widespread, persistent and enduring popularity of the man whom

by common consent, was called the National Bard. There was no name in the entire history of our country, which was more dearly treasured by the people, than the name of Robert

Burns. The fame of Burns was no ephemeral thing, born of the hour and perishing with the hour. From the tragic moment of his, his spirit started upon its triumphal procession which had resulted in this, that something akin to worship had been established in the hearts of his countrymen towards him. So it was that of Burns the man and the Poet, we could say in his own words:—

"Time but the impression deeper makes,
As streams their channels deeper wear."

What was it that the fame of Burns rested upon? Let them turn to his works and ask why it was, that after all these years, men still found in them freshness and inspiration. But what in his works was it, to which all this extra-ordinary and enduring admiration was directed? The first thing that struck them about his works was that so far from the subjects which they were about being extraordinary, they were without exception ordinary and commonplace. Dealing with the women about whom Burns wrote, and the locality in which he lived, there was nothing striking or remarkable in the scenery in which he wrote. He was himself the son of a peasant, who had lived a life of unceasing toil, and ended his career a physical wreck and in a state of hopeless bankruptcy. A great part of Burns' own life was made up of drudgery and grinding poverty. "The cheerless gloom of a hermit with the unceasing toil of a galley slave." That was how he described his life-until his sixteenth birthday. And yet this man with such a genius for life, dealing with such topics as he had mentioned,

had attained glory and immortality among his countrymen. Henley was blamed for declaring that "Burns was the satirist and singer of a parish." But Henley was right. All Burns' themes were humble, homely and parochial. He recognised the fact that the throne rested upon the cottage, and that the grandeur of a country sprang from the love, loyalty and faith of every common man, woman and child.

Burns was not great in virtue of his birth, surroundings, education or the subjects on which he wrote, or the people with whom he consorted, but in virtue of his inward power of mind, heart and soul. In every relation of life, one might choose to consider Burns taught reality. Patriot, lover, friend, politician, ploughman, exciseman, churchman, parent, poet in every one of these relations he was great, because he was himself without humbug, and the starch and stiffening of pretentiousness. He exalted and glorified man's surroundings and commonplace things and ordinary everyday interests.

By his superior insight, he found in the common gossip of the common folk and the common life of a common Scots parish, those things in man's life which are eternal. Interests that never fade and love that could not die.

Burns had an ear for every cadence of human sorrow, an eye for all that was tender, sweet and fair, a heart that was rent with the pangs of regret for all the desolate and unfortunate. It was for this reason that Wordsworth de-clared that Burns

Showed my youth,
How verse may build a princely throne
On humble truth.

That was the secret of Burns' greatness. And it was the secret in all greatness in art and life. The secret of Burns' power was naturalness, sincerity, open vision and humanity. It was these qualities that enabled him to find interest in the saturnalia of "The Jolly Beggars," and made it possible for him to exalt Jean Armour, a Mauchline mason's daughter, to the proud eminence of immortality beside Helen of Troy and the great women of the world, for whose sake kingdoms were rent and crowns cast away. It was these qualities of naturalness, sincerity, and love of truth that made Burns so scornful of pretentiousness, conventiality and hypocrisy, and of the starch and stiffening that went to the making of pretended saints. They brought him also into violent conflict with his age and its ideals. For a morality and religion which consisted chiefly of sour—faced asceticism and in long—faced hypocrisy, in frowning on pleasure, laughter and gaiety, and making life a mournful procession through a vale of tears, to an abode of fire and brimstone, Burns was for substituting a new ideal:—

"A social, friendly, honest man,
Whate'er he be,
'Tis he fulfils great Nature's plan,
And none but he.
A heart benevolent and kind,
The most resembles God."

No better word than that had ever been uttered in the name of religion.

Mr. Graham maintained that, of all Burns' mistakes, follies, and sins were the result of his qualities, not of his defects; of his strength, not of his weakness.

Even the light that led astray
Was light from Heaven.

In the brightness of a new day, Burns was for us a radiant and resplendent figure, bidding us to be done with gloom, and calling us to live for a

? of love and life